

The Founding Fathers of Murdoch:
Extract from "It Had Better Be A Good One", by Professor Geoffrey Bolton,
1985.

In the isolation of an out-of-season beach hotel, away from any distractions beyond a brisk walk along the wintry shore of the Indian Ocean, the founding fathers of Murdoch subjected themselves to an intensive exchange of ideas. Vice Chancellor Stephen Griew had few preconceptions to impose on the gathering beyond a leaning towards the new and the exotic and perhaps a corresponding tendency to undervalue anything, which seemed to smack of the conventional wisdom of Western Australia, particularly the University of Western Australia. He saw his role rather as that of the impresario, stimulating the foundation professors to develop their ideas, picking and choosing those that seemed best fitted to his concept of the Murdoch ethos, but never allowing himself to seem the constant ally of one particular view or faction.

Of the ten foundation professors present at Contacio six were appointed chairmen of Murdoch's Schools of Study. Robert Dunlop was already in charge of veterinary studies, having previously worked at Makerere in Uganda and as head of physiological sciences at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine at Saskatchewan. Broad-shouldered, energetic, and possessed of a yeoman sense of humour, he was a tireless worker for veterinary studies but sometimes lacked proportion in intervening in matters outside his field. Jack Loneragan, formerly of the Institute of Agriculture at the University of Western Australia, was a plant biologist who became Dean of the School of Environmental and Life Sciences. Unassuming and practical, he was one of the most thoughtful and consistent influences on the early years of Murdoch. Jim Parker became Dean of Mathematical and Physical Sciences. One of the most distinguished products of the chemistry school at the University of Western Australia, Parker made his name as a kineticist and subsequently at the Institute of Advanced Studies in the Australian National University for his researches in mineral chemistry. He brought with him to Murdoch a number of patent rights administered through a company known as ANUMIN. Serious-minded and passionately devoted to his subject, he was yet able to recognise quality in fields far removed from his own, and was a great influence in ensuring that Murdoch did not neglect research and postgraduate studies.

Brian Hill, Dean of Education, came from a senior lectureship at the University of Wollongong but was by origin a Western Australian who followed Dan Dunn as secretary of the Jackson Committee. He was an admirably systematic administrator, whose reputation as a committed

evangelical Christian did not hinder him from operating tenaciously and successfully in the sometimes cut-throat world of educational politics. John Frodsham, Dean of what he wished should be called the School of Human Communication rather than humanities, came from a chair at the University of Dar-es-Salaam, which he held on secondment from the Australian National University. The most eloquent of all the foundation professors, he was credited with understanding seventeen languages and enjoyed a profound scholarly reputation in classical Chinese studies. Committed to an intellectual course, which diverged from many of his colleagues, he withdrew after a while from administrative responsibilities to concentrate on adding the study of paranormal phenomena to his scholarly interests. John Raser, Dean of the School of Social Inquiry, belonged to that group of American students of international relations who, having mastered the new disciplines of simulation and games theory, were repelled by the United States involvement in Vietnam and turned to the Californian 'third wave' school of psychoanalysts with their emphasis on personal self-awareness. An exuberant personality who sported an earring and enjoyed surfing, Raser more than any of his colleagues embodied for many 'the Murdoch ethos'.

The remaining professors negotiated themselves into appropriate Schools. Desmond O'Connor, Professor of Environmental Science, momentarily considered linking with Parker but joined Loneragan in what became the School of Environmental and Life Sciences. Originally a lecturer in engineering at the University of New South Wales, O'Connor served some years as chief of the environmental sciences division of the United States Army Research Office, acquiring a trace of American accent. A wry, unaggressive character, O'Connor was a keen amateur aviator and yachtsman. Bruce Mainsbridge came to the Chair of Physics from a similar rank at the University of Papua-New Guinea, having been previously one of Sir Ernest Titterton's team at the Australian National University. A robust and independent-minded controversialist, he sometimes found himself in a minority of one, but was respected for his resourcefulness in finding new approaches to the teaching of physics at a time when the subject was under challenge. He was attached to the School of Mathematical and Physical Sciences together with Alex Robertson who came to the Chair of Mathematics from a similar post at the University of Keele in England. Robertson shared to the full the Scottish love of argument from first principles and the Scottish scepticism about ambitious plans for human improvement. He soon found himself stereotyped as Murdoch's resident Doubting Thomas, and his prudent reservations sometimes received less attention than they merited. Geoffrey Bolton was attracted to Murdoch after serving on its Planning Board while Professor of Modern History at the University of Western Australia. With Loneragan, Parker, and Hill he was one of the four native-born

foundation professors. Although he strongly asserted the need to respect Western Australian sensibilities in presenting Murdoch's innovations he was too easy-going and conciliatory to have much influence on policy. After consultation with Raser and Frodsham it was decided to place history with the former in Social Inquiry. Later Bolton became Pro-Vice-Chancellor and chaired the Board of External Studies.

Raser in 1981 described Frodsham, Hill, Mainsbridge and himself as the 'radicals' among the foundation professors with Robertson, O'Connor, Parker, and Loneragan as the 'conservatives' and Bolton and Dunlop occupying some ill-defined middle group. At the Contacio meeting, however, these lines of ideology were not easy to discern. Stephen Griew asked each of the foundation professors to write a statement of their expectations for Murdoch. Robertson and O'Connor joined Dunlop and Raser in urging that Murdoch should not be dominated by its bureaucracy; Hill and Mainsbridge said that teaching should not be subordinated to research, where Parker put the claims of research somewhat higher. Frodsham struck a global note: 'the human race is growing so fast that it threatens the stability of the biosphere itself...' He urged his colleagues to see themselves 'as custodians of established humanist values, creators of new standards, critics of society and prophets pointing the way to the future... As secular missionaries academics must be out to educate, instruct, persuade, convert, and save'. Bolton was mildly skeptical of Murdoch's capacity to fill this role: 'Western Australia is not adequately noticed or consulted by the rest of Australia and Australia is not a major power. If we take the responsibility for disturbing these people out of their present complacency, we should be quite clear why we are doing it, and what we expect to come of it'. But Griew, although he stressed the importance of close relationships between Murdoch and the community it served, found this pragmatism disappointing.

In the end it was Raser whose submission was accepted by all as best expressing the views of those present. He argued that Murdoch's students would be not only part of the first generation whose parents and teachers were themselves products of the post-atomic age but also the first products of the electronic revolution and the counter-culture. Past experience would not be a useful guide for teaching and planning in the future. Loneragan said that the Contacio consensus could be summed up in a passage from Raser's paper:

...I believe Murdoch should respond to that need for humane and vital intelligence. *Humane* in that it is oriented towards development of the maximum human potential for creativity, growth, love, community and joy rather than towards exploitation of man and nature. *Vital* in that it is deeply rooted in the real emotional, spiritual, and physical needs of men rather than

being mere cleverness. If Murdoch is to succeed in fostering such humane and vital intelligence, it must play the role of a *healer*. At first glance this may seem an unusual goal to suggest for a university, for universities (at their best) have traditionally tried primarily to *nurture critical thought* by preserving, exploring, and goading. While I do not denigrate either this goal or these means, I believe that in a world as profoundly troubled and pathology-riddled as ours, the highest calling may be that of healing.

This was the Murdoch ethos as accepted without dissent at Contacio. Raser saw well enough that areas of potential disagreement remained. 'Some of the foundation professors were of the opinion that what commonly exists is now a betrayal of the idea of education. Others felt that the problems are minor enough; that they require simply better techniques and policy rather than a revolutionary vision'. Some accepted existing definitions of excellence, others sought new and less exclusively cerebral standards. Beyond these issues however there were other problems, which simply were not faced at Contacio. In the euphoric first year of the Whitlam era few could have foreseen the scale or length of the economic recession, which was about to overtake the Western world, turning students to the single-minded pursuit of job qualifications and to political neo-conservatism.